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U. S. Air Force Oral History Interview

K239.0512-837

General David A. Burchinal



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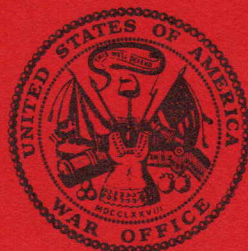
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CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN

GENERAL DAVID A. BURCHINAL

and

COLONEL JACK SCHMDT
LIEUTENANT COLONEL JACK STRASER

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UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

K239.0512-837

Interview

of

General David A. Burchinal

MICROFILMED BY HOTM

By

Colonel John B. Schmidt
& Lt Col Jack Straser

Date 11 April 1975

Location Northrop Corporation Suite
Washington DC

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ON during 1975 Army
DAY MONTH YEAR

(PLEASE INITIAL THE APPROPRIATE SPACES).

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H. C. Burchinal
INTERVIEWEE'S SIGNATURE

21 May 1976
DATE

WITNESS' SIGNATURE

Kathy Chase
DATE 21st May 1976

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FOREWORD

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of a situation as he remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by USAF historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first names, ranks, or titles are also provided. Any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the transcript.

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SECTION 1

NORTHROP CORPORATION SUITE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

DATE: 11 APRIL 1975

TAPED INTERVIEW WITH: GENERAL DAVID A. BURCHINAL, USAF (RET.)

CONDUCTED BY: COLONEL JACK SCHMIDT AND LIEUTENANT COLONEL JACK STRASER

[JOHN B. SCHMIDT]

INTERVIEWER: General Burchinal, it's a pleasure to have you with us today, and we appreciate you taking the time from your very busy schedule to work with us on the Oral History Program for the US Army War College.

GEN BURCHINAL: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure for me to sit back, which I don't often get to do these days, and think back over all the years that have gone by. Next week I face my big round "0", that 60th Birthday, and just because I'm contributing to this program, I hope people don't begin to regard me as part of history instead of the current scene. As long as we have that understanding, I'm happy to help the War College in this undertaking.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, sir.

GEN BURCHINAL: You have taken me way back when you say, "pre-military childhood days". I was born and brought up in a small town (Washington) in Western Pennsylvania. I was fortunate at that time in having fairly well-to-do parents, which in looking back I find set me somewhat apart. Not in my own eyes, but in the eyes of some of my contemporaries that I met when I was growing up and going to the public school system, the grade school. I found very early, that because my family was a little bit better off than some of the others, I had to fight my way, literally, to establish my place within the society of my contemporaries. I was always being challenged on something or other, and I had to prove the only way kids know how, and that was the way my life started. I guess it never did really change in that respect. I had a very fine set of parents. Although I lost my mother when

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deployment over and found our base all right and got into it, and got in the swing. And that was great to be left alone to do your job. We had priority on logistic support, we had more supplies than we could use, and we could just fly our tails off. And where we had been flying 1400 hours a month in training in the states, we could fly 21-2200 hours a month over there, and we could get off the training requirements like mad.

We had a radar bomb plot down in London we could use. But, we had a hell of a time with our visual requirements because the weather was too bad, the bombing range off the coast was socked in and the targets weren't instrumented. So, we had at that time, if you'll recall, the three good bases down in Morocco, and the other outfits were using those for rotation. So, I made a deal with the commander down at Sidi Slimane. I said, "Let me set up a squadron framework here, and I will rotate airplanes through it to get our visual requirements off. And if they wanted to come up and get some soup--weather flying, radar flying stuff, come on up, and I'd let them work in my area and support them." So, I kept the squadron down there and then would rotate my airplanes through it to get all our visual bombing requirements.

The training went along very well. We had a special mission that we were supposed to do. It was on the books, but no one ever took it very seriously. It was a twenty-two hour mission called "Long Legs". When you got to a certain point in training, you could do these long missions, extended range missions, that were supposed to prove we were really global. So, I had gotten one of my crews, the first one that was going to make select crew,

and was my bomb ^{competition} compilation crew, and I said, "We're going down to look over our outfit in Sidi, and then on the way back we are going to fly one of these 'Long Legs' jobs, twenty-two hours, so put some stuff onboard to keep us going--a chemical can and some stuff to eat." And I notified the bomber command what we were doing. And everything was okay. So, we took off, dropped all our bombs on the range, and flew back up to the UK, picked up our tanker with fuel, and flew some more nav legs on the way back to Africa, picked up tankers in Africa, did this a couple of times. Well, about the time when we had planned to go back and land, the damn weather had socked in. We were limited to 500 feet and 1 mile visibility for a UK landing. The tankers were allowed a little better than that, and with the weather down to 300 feet and $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, the tankers could still operate. So, I couldn't land in the UK but could be refueled. And then the UK really closed down and the tankers couldn't get off, but I had enough fuel that I'd taken on in Africa to return there. I'd taken on a maximum load down in Africa, and that was plenty to go up to England and turn around and go back to Africa. And twenty-two hours went by, and they kept saying, "Well, it's going to improve, we know it will get better." I said, "Well, I'll be back in six or eight hours, and see how it is." So, I'd go down and pick up a tanker and exercise with the fighters. We had a couple fighter outfits there. And we'd do some more visual requirements. We had dropped all our bombs, flew some more nav legs, back up again, and still below minimums. And I said, "Okay, I'll be back." Well, I kept doing this, and doing this, and pretty soon it got to be kind of a long flight, I guess, better than forty hours. By then people began to talk a little about it. And by then the bomber command folks had stumbled onto

the fact that something strange was happening, and this looked like an attempt was being made to set an endurance record, and you never did that unless you got permission ahead of time. And, of course, I hadn't asked anybody if I could set an endurance record for B-47s.

So, we finally got back, and they said, "Okay, you've got 500' and 1 mile." Well, by then, I had such a load of fuel since I had expected I would have to go down to Africa, that I had to come down and sit on top of the closed deck, which was about six or seven thousand feet, just cruise around for a couple of more hours, burning off fuel. Finally, we got down to max landing weight, and we came in and landed. It was, oh, forty-seven hours and thirty-five minutes from the time we had taken off, which was a considerable time more than the longest time any of these jets had ever been in the air.

And I didn't think all that much about it. We landed and debriefed. I went on up to get a little sleep as we were pretty tired by then. I shaved and cleaned up, and I had a call waiting for me from a good friend of mine who was the general commanding the bomber command in London, Tommy Musgrave.

"I want you in my office tomorrow morning. Explain why you have taken such an unauthorized flight," this thing and the other. "I'm going to have an inspector, so be prepared to give testimony and I may prefer charges!" I said, "Yes sir, I'll be there." I went down the next morning and went through what had happened. It was pretty clear we must've planned something like this, but nobody else, except my wing Ops officer and a couple of others, knew about it. But, they weren't going to get us to admit it. I said, "We checked in everytime, we talked to the command center, they knew what was going on, and at anytime they could have told us to land in Africa. We

just wanted to keep on going--we were trying to get home." But, by then word was out, reporters were there, and he was highly teed off. But, the inspector finally went to him and said, "You haven't got a case, and furthermore, it would be the most unpopular thing to do right now." He said, "Okay, I'm going to drop it." I said, "Thank you very much." I never did admit to him that we had started out to break a record in the first place. But we had covered ourselves.

We completed our training requirements and flew our tails off and did a great job, and so did the tanker outfit. We only had one accident while we were there. One of my kids, at night, during a rain storm came into Lakenheath. It was the first time we had run into this kind of situation. Over the end of the runway he hit a very heavy squall, and it was raining cats and dogs. And he sat down about a third of the way down the runway. That shouldn't have been any problem, not too heavy, not too fast. But when he started to put on the brakes, he was skidding. He was on that thin film of water on the runway, and just hydroplaned right down that runway. It was the first time it had happened to us. He didn't know what to do. And he just hydroplaned right off the end of the runway. There was a big ditch there--always ditches in the British airfields, and he folded the gear and dumped the aircraft down in a little ravine. It didn't hurt any of the crew. They took a look and said, "Oh, we'll drag that thing out and fix it up. We'll fly that again. That's no 'Class 26'." We didn't want any major accident on the record, and it wouldn't be if we could repair it. But the more we looked at it, the more we knew we were going to have to eat this one. And so we did. We just took it apart and cannibalized